

# Meet the Milk Man

## Salute to Agriculture

Third in a Series

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*March is the time to recognize farmers, ranchers and dairymen and the role they play in putting food on our tables. March 18 is National Ag Day, and as Box Elder County is a leader in the state in agricultural production – field crops, cattle, sheep and dairy cows – this series salutes those who wouldn't trade a tractor seat for a seat on Wall Street and prefer punching steers to punching a time clock.*

When Justin Norr was preparing for high school graduation, he had every opportunity ahead of him. With a fistful of scholarships and a hard push to go into the field of sports medicine, he headed off to get a higher education.

“So I went to college to learn how to be a cow milker,” the Deweyville dairyman jokes.

But he wouldn't trade milk pails or manure piles for all the money in the NFL locker room.

“Trade it for what?” he questioned. “There are no guarantees anywhere. And I have always loved the dairy, and I love the cows.”

Justin operates Norr Farms with his father, Curtis, spending 14 hours a day laboring in the milk barn, feeding newborn calves, tending fields of alfalfa, barley, silage corn and red wheat, irrigating some of those fields and harvesting those same crops. It's much more than a full-time job. It is his life.

While he considers the farm a small operation in size, keeping nearly a thousand acres usable and a barn full of Holsteins contented can often be a daunting task. With about 55 cows that require milking twice a day, Justin's morning starts about 4 a.m., and he is lucky to crawl into bed by 11 p.m. Sometimes he has help in the milking parlor from his dad or his 17-year-old son, Colt.

Other times it's a solo venture to get the cows run through the routine before the truck from Gossner's in Logan shows up to whisk the family's liquid livelihood away.

Those milk cows require a lot of feed to produce at a moneymaking level. On this farm, that feed is grown on site, or at least on property owned or leased by the Norrs. A good share is dry farm ground, including about 325 acres in Promontory where the family raises some alfalfa and a cash crop of hard red winter wheat.

Nearly one hundred acres closer to home are irrigated, which means hours of moving pipes or sprinklers, something that is often done by an ambitious crew made of young nieces and nephews, sometimes under Grandpa Curtis' direction and sometimes with the help of Justin's wife, Amanda.

“I tell him it's okay if we can all be tortured as a family,” she laughed.

Justin said his own children, both in their teens, are just as helpful with the unending list of chores, but don't seem to have the same drive to keep it going that he did at their age.

“They've see the negative side and they want to get away from it,” he said. He hopes someday at least one of them has a change of heart and decides to join with him on the farm, just as he did with his father.

Amanda said the biggest negative is the short cord the family is tied on when it comes to a dairy. “Life revolves around the cows,” she said. “There is no vacation time, no time away.” She said their children sometimes resent the fact that they saw little of their father growing up, although he was always “at home.”

“He often misses events and concerts,” she said. “We count on him to be there and then something goes wrong, something breaks down and he doesn't show up. It isn't his fault; it's just the way it is.”

On the other hand, their children

are exposed to life's lessons on a regular basis and have learned the value of putting in an honest day's labor. “Our kids can see what their dad does,” Amanda pointed out. “They know just how hard he works.”

The load is not all on Dad's shoulders, however. Daughter Cassidy, 15, is the designated night feeder of the host of baby calves born on the farm. Because those babies are taken immediately off the mother so she can return to the milking herd, Cassidy has become the nursery nurturer.

Justin said they once hoped for all heifer calves with the births, but with bull calves selling for \$300 or more right now, it doesn't matter what the new arrivals are, they are still a profitable addition to the farm's bottom line financially.

That bottom line, however, is a wavy one, at best. Amanda said others' wages are not often dictated by an outside source like milk prices are. “We never have any control of the product price. He can't work harder or put in more time to make more,” she said of her husband.

And there have been some very tough years on this dairy. In the past, part of the herd has gone on the auction block so the family could meet financial obligations. Curtis had to take an outside job just to keep the milk barn door open about five years ago. He still works that job, even though he and his son have regular discussions on the day-to-day operations, according to Justin.

“We talk about what needs to happen, how we want it to happen and then go to work and get it done.”

Justin just shrugs off the continual ups and downs and chalks it up to the life of a farmer. The pluses outweigh the negatives in his book, anyway. “It gives me a chance to be outdoors all day,” he grinned.

A true farmer's wife, Amanda agreed. “I knew when I married him, this is all he ever wanted.”

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